

Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls

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Bachelor of Fine Art with Honours.

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Abstract

Bright eyed little dormitory girls

This project has been an inquiry into how I am able to use a poetic sensibility to potently depict social and political realities. The work specifically addresses and illustrates the lived experiences of my maternal grandmother who was forced to live under government control on the Woorabinda Mission in Central Queensland in the 1930s.

The research corroborates oral histories, firsthand accounts and documentation that underpin the physical visual works. The works employ found, used materials and objects as describers of both physical events and psychological responses.

The process has revealed the need to resist the strategies of literal depictions and didactic statements in order to disclose and reveal content. The research and artworks have engaged with understandings of critical literacy, art discourse context and poetic modes in order to invite inquiry into the potent subject matter, to elicit emotional responses and to generate understanding. The works form part of my ongoing commitment to lessening the burden of silence that has acted on my family and our communities.

Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the research paper contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the research paper itself.

(Signed)_____

Dale Harding

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1. Introduction

My BFA Honours research work addresses the question: How can a poetic sensibility, depict with potency, the social and political realities experienced by my family members who were forced to live under government control? The project focuses on the relationship between poetic modes of expression through the effectiveness and agency of specific subject matter.

The document describes a research led process where the genesis of the work is the oral histories and lived experiences of my family Elders. Rather than continuing to accept historical myths about Queensland's colonialist history, including the effects of the government enforced Aboriginal mission system, I am responding to residues of raw emotions that result from lived experiences and inherited memories.

In the process of gathering histories, reviewing historical documents and revising and rewriting histories I have been both a participant and an observer as well as a recorder. These different positions have enabled me to present viewpoints where Aboriginal perspectives, experiences and voices matter.

The outcome of my studio based research has resulted in a series of works that employ material signifiers and poetic modes of expression such gaps and silences, metonym and metaphor to depict the unrepresented.

I have re-worked used, found objects to speak of traces of memory. These poetic objects give authenticity of agency and expression to my depictions and they work to lessen the burden of knowing that remains with my family and communities.

2. Historical Context

*We are accustomed to associate the word 'Mission' with religious protection, and the teachings of Christ, not as a fit name for a slavery mart, and it would mean nothing short of this if free people under the protection of the British flag are to be seized against their will, rounded up by police, and shipped there by force, whether they will or not...*¹

With the rapid expansion of the pastoral frontier in Queensland in the 19th century, Aboriginal people were forced into conflicts and battles with colonists to retain sovereign lands. It was considered inevitable that collisions between advancing white settlers and Aboriginal people would result in what was openly acknowledged as “a war of extermination”.² To this end, Queensland government policy of the mid 1800s legitimised the desire of pastoralists to ‘disperse’ Aboriginal people in order to make way for the “advancing tide of settlement”.³ With government policy forming consent, the pastoral industry in Queensland was established in the wake of frontier warfare. Estimates of the Aboriginal population in Queensland were as high as 200,000 in 1839, however, as a result of ongoing pastoral frontier warfare, Queensland government estimates put the Aboriginal population at some 15,000 survivors approaching the turn of the century.⁴

In 1896, with knowledge of the disastrous consequences of the European colonial impact on Aboriginal people in Queensland, the then government commissioned Archibald Meston to produce a report that was to suggest plans for the “improvement of Aboriginal welfare in the State”.⁵ Meston’s paternalistic report and recommendations ultimately led to the Queensland government passing the unprecedented *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* of 1897.⁶ It can be argued that the intent for this discriminatory legislation was as much to finalise the process of dispossession and to secure the supply of Aboriginal labour, as it was for the ‘protection’ of the dispossessed populations from the destruction of pastoral frontier

¹ Cardwell Resident quoted in Val Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History: From Contact and Conflict to Cultural Recognition* (Brisbane: Arts Queensland, 2002), 178.

² Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History*, 76-77.

³ Henry Reynolds, *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 195.

⁴ Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History*, 90.

⁵ Scott L’Oste-Brown and Luke Godwin, *Living Under the Act: Taroom Aboriginal Reserve 1911-1927* (Rockhampton: Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage, 1995), 4; Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History*, 122-123.

⁶ L’Oste-Brown and Godwin, *Living Under the Act*, 4-5; Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History*, 113-123.

warfare and the impacts of European colonialism.⁷ The 1897 Act determined that Aboriginal people's lives could be controlled by the State government with regard to "where they could live, or where they could be removed to live, where they could travel, their employment, their bank accounts, their marriages, their health, and whether they could be exempted from provisions of the Act".⁸

The *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* outlined the forced removal and segregation of Aboriginal people, "half-castes married to, or children of, Aborigines, or those who 'habitually' associated with Aborigines" from white society onto government controlled reserves and settlements.⁹ Under the provisions of the 1897 Act, Woorabinda Aboriginal Reserve was established to take up the 'inmates' of the Taroom Reserve upon its closure in 1927.¹⁰ It is important to state that my Elders and their families lived under government control on Woorabinda. My matrilineal Grandmother, Nanna Lawton, was born on Woorabinda shortly after the establishment of the Reserve.

Unlike the preceding Taroom Reserve, the Woorabinda settlement was characterised by the involvement of missionaries in the confinement of its Aboriginal 'inmates'. It is because of the involvement and activity of missionaries at Woorabinda that the colloquial title Woorabinda Mission is used as opposed to the more ambiguous 'Woorabinda Aboriginal Reserve'.



Fig. 1 *Queensland Government Crest*, 1945. Scanned off a document from the Director of Native Affairs. This is a stamp of the authority that controlled Woorabinda Mission.

⁷ Reynolds, *Dispossession*, 195-199; Therese Forde, "Confinement and Control: A History of Woorabinda Aboriginal Community 1927-199" (BA with Honours Thesis, University of Queensland, 1990).

⁸ Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History*, 127.

⁹ L'Oste-Brown and Godwin, *Living Under the Act*, 5.

¹⁰ Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History*, 134.



Fig. 2 Photographer unidentified, *View of the Taroom Aboriginal Settlement, Queensland, 1914*, photograph.



Fig. 3 Photographer unidentified, *Beginnings of the Woorabinda Aboriginal Settlement, ca. 1927*, photograph.

3. Oral Histories

It was more like a concentration camp than a good place to live. In fact I told the Superintendent a couple of times, it was nearly as bad as living in a concentration camp and that we were living in a jail.¹¹

Firsthand accounts of the social and political realities experienced by my family members who were forced to live under government control are the primary sources of my research. These accounts are valid and primary historic records. The reality of Aboriginal life in Queensland is that every Murri¹² family maintains memories of life under ‘the Act’. As children we hear our Elders corroborating and relating their experiences; as young people we hear those experiences retold firsthand; as adults we relive these experiences with our Elders as we take on their memories as our histories. This oral tradition of retelling and reliving histories serves to record narratives as compositions of multiple viewpoints. In this project I visually notate and write into history the lived experiences of my family members who were forced to live under government control on Woorabinda Aboriginal Mission in Central Queensland.

After the death of my matrilineal Grandfather¹³ in 2008 I was given the responsibility of recording the family histories of my Mother’s family. The process began by copying and compiling any photographs and historical documents that were made available to me. While initially I visited a range of family Elders who were willing to participate, my research became focused on the oral histories of my matrilineal Grandmother, Nanna Lawton¹⁴, and my Grandfather’s siblings, Aunty Isobel Cleland and Uncle Bill Lawton. In the early stages of research my process was limited to recording the discussions that occurred when identifying the people and places captured in the photos, but this quickly led to more formal interview sessions where extended accounts of ‘old times’ were recorded in detail. Throughout this process my Mother has been present and active in the majority of my research sessions. My Mother’s contribution to my research outcomes is invaluable as she enables cross-generational dialogue between family members. This provides multiple viewpoints for corroborating facts and assists in teasing out finer details of histories. In line with correct protocols,¹⁵ my methodologies for conducting research into the oral histories of my family Elders involve these considerations:

¹¹ Tim Kemp quoted in Sue Maytom, *The Oral History of Mr Tim Kemp: Gungaloo Man* (Mackay: Maytom, 2001), 31.

¹² A Murri is an Aboriginal person from the area of Australia occupied as the state of Queensland.

¹³ In consideration of family protocols I choose not to name my Mother’s Father.

¹⁴ Margaret Lawton.

¹⁵ Correct protocols includes research methodology protocols and Aboriginal cultural protocols.

- Oral testimonies are recorded under explicit consent.
- Interview sessions are conducted with mutual understanding of the intended use of recorded testimonies.
- Authority over the use of oral testimonies remains with family Elders.
- Original items remain with participants.
- Oral testimonies are recorded face to face with participants.
- When cross-referenced in relation to other testimonies and documented accounts, the individual's own account is not compromised by my input.

In hearing these oral histories relived, with the residues of raw emotion evident and the effects of the experiences still present, I am moved to express what I feel for my Elders. It is difficult to remain unmoved when hearing of the cruelty, the suffering, the brutality and the inhumanity of life under government control on Woorabinda Mission. Compounding the difficulty of hearing these histories relived is the frustration and disgust felt, that while these experiences belong to our Elders and the Aboriginal community in Queensland, the burden of the truth belongs almost solely with those who are silenced in popular versions of Queensland's history.

My Nanna and her extended family experienced life on the Mission at its worst – between the World Wars and the Depression. It has been said to me that 'everyone had it tough' in those times, which is shamefully ignorant of the true history of Queensland's colonisation and certainly an extension of the racist oppression experienced by my Elders. What I feel for my Elders moves me to share these experiences with an audience through visual arts practice with the objective of lessening the burden of these truths on my family and our communities.



Fig. 4 Photographer unidentified, *Ghungalu Elders: Kemp, Priestley and Brown Siblings with Uncle Tim Kemp*, ca. 1990, photograph.

4. Corroborating Research

Published documentation of oral testimonies by Aboriginal people describing their experiences of life under forced government control has provided my research with citable resources and cross-reference material. These published testimonies, in conjunction with the oral histories of my Elders, have enabled me to corroborate relevant details when developing a visual language through which to communicate content in my studio research. Key texts in this area of my research include oral testimonies given by my Nanna Lawton and Uncle Tim Kemp¹⁶ as well as those of other former residents of Woorabinda Mission who also lived there under government control.

L'Oste-Brown & Godwin¹⁷, Forde¹⁸ and Kidd¹⁹ all worked closely with my family's Elders and other Aboriginal people to document oral testimonies and to support these with archival research. Most importantly Kidd documents an oral account of torture told by my Nanna Lawton that has been a central focus in my studio research throughout this project²⁰. Additionally, this oral history is upheld by Forde's evidence²¹ of firsthand accounts from other former residents of Woorabinda Mission that detail acts of torture comparable to those exacted upon my Grandmother under government control.²²

My Nanna's oral accounts of life on Woorabinda Mission are further reinforced in documentation of Queensland Government policies. Kidd explains how the Queensland government supplied Aboriginal domestics to industries across the state through the systematic supply of involuntary indentured labour.²³ Forde further describes how the Queensland Government generated a supply of unpaid or underpaid Aboriginal domestic servants.²⁴ My

¹⁶ Senior Ghungulu Elder, Great Grandmother's brother.

¹⁷ See: L'Oste-Brown, Scott, and Godwin, Luke. *Living Under the Act: Taroom Aboriginal Reserve 1911-1927*. Rockhampton: Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage, 1995.

¹⁸ See: Forde, Therese. "Confinement and Control: A History of Woorabinda Aboriginal Community 1927-1990." BA with Honours Thesis, University of Queensland, 1990.

¹⁹ See: Kidd, Rosalind. *Trustees on Trial: Recovering the Stolen Wages*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006.

²⁰ "Margaret Lawton was twelve years old when she was sent to work. Feeling sexual advances she ran away but was soon captured by police and returned to Woorabinda. Her head was shaved and she was forced to wear a hessian bag as punishment. She was confined to the dormitory, made to eat her meals on the wood heap, and not allowed to see her parents". Kidd, *Trustees on Trial*, 84.

²¹ Forde, "Confinement and Control."

²² "Another girl and I were sent there because she was pregnant too and we were put in a dormitory...where girls were kept...They were very strict because a couple of young girls ran away from the dormitories and when they came back, they had to have their hair shaved right off and the sugar bag was cut [and placed over their head] and they had to chip out on the footpath – that was the punishment for running away". Forde, "Confinement and Control."

²³ Kidd, *Trustees on Trial*, 58-59, 62-63.

²⁴ Forde, "Confinement and Control'.

Nanna Lawton, Great Grandmother Effie Priestley and many other female ancestors were ‘contracted out’ as Aboriginal domestics.²⁵

In the recorded testimonies of Uncle Tim Kemp, saddening first-hand descriptions give a picture of the isolation faced by young girls and women who were forcibly removed from their families and placed into church run mission dormitories.²⁶ In these dormitories ‘inmates’²⁷ were taught basic skills for domestic servitude.²⁸ Donovan’s depiction of the dormitory system, which indicates that the serfdom of the dormitories was also a means of gaining the “sexual control” of Aboriginal women on missions,²⁹ aligns with experiences accounted by my Nanna Lawton and Uncle Tim Kemp.³⁰ In addition to oral and written records of life under government control, photographs and archival documents provide visual evidence that informs my understanding of those experiences.

Throughout my ongoing engagement with the oral and written texts of these histories, photographs and archival documents continue to inform my mental imagery and my emotional responses that shape my creative process. The primary visual texts in this area of my research are photographic portraits of two of my female ancestors. One image is of my Nanna’s Mother, Nanna Effie Priestley, in a standard issue, stiff calico mission dress (fig. 5). The other image is of one of my Nanna’s Grandmothers, Nanna Sophie Mummins, who is photographed in the rigid uniform of domestic servitude (fig. 6). In both photographs the empty facial expressions are tragic depictions that speak of the psychological destruction of life under government control.

The two photographs provide the visual context for the histories that my studio research addresses. Other visual texts that influence my practice include images of other Aboriginal domestics (fig. 7), dormitory interiors (fig. 8), historical photographs of Woorabinda Mission (fig. 9) and Nazi concentration camp uniforms (fig. 10).

²⁵ My Nanna Lawton and her sister were forcibly taken from their mother, separated from each other and placed in the girls’ dormitory system. Nanna Priestley was forced to work as an indentured domestic to pay for the upkeep of her daughters. At around 12 years of age my Nanna Lawton was contracted out as a domestic.

²⁶ Maytom, *The Oral History of Mr Tim Kemp*, 12-13.

²⁷ Forde, “Confinement and Control’.

²⁸ Maytom, *The Oral History of Mr Tim Kemp*, 12.

²⁹ Donovan, *The Reality of a Dark History*, 138.

³⁰ Maytom, *The Oral History of Mr Tim Kemp*, 12-13.

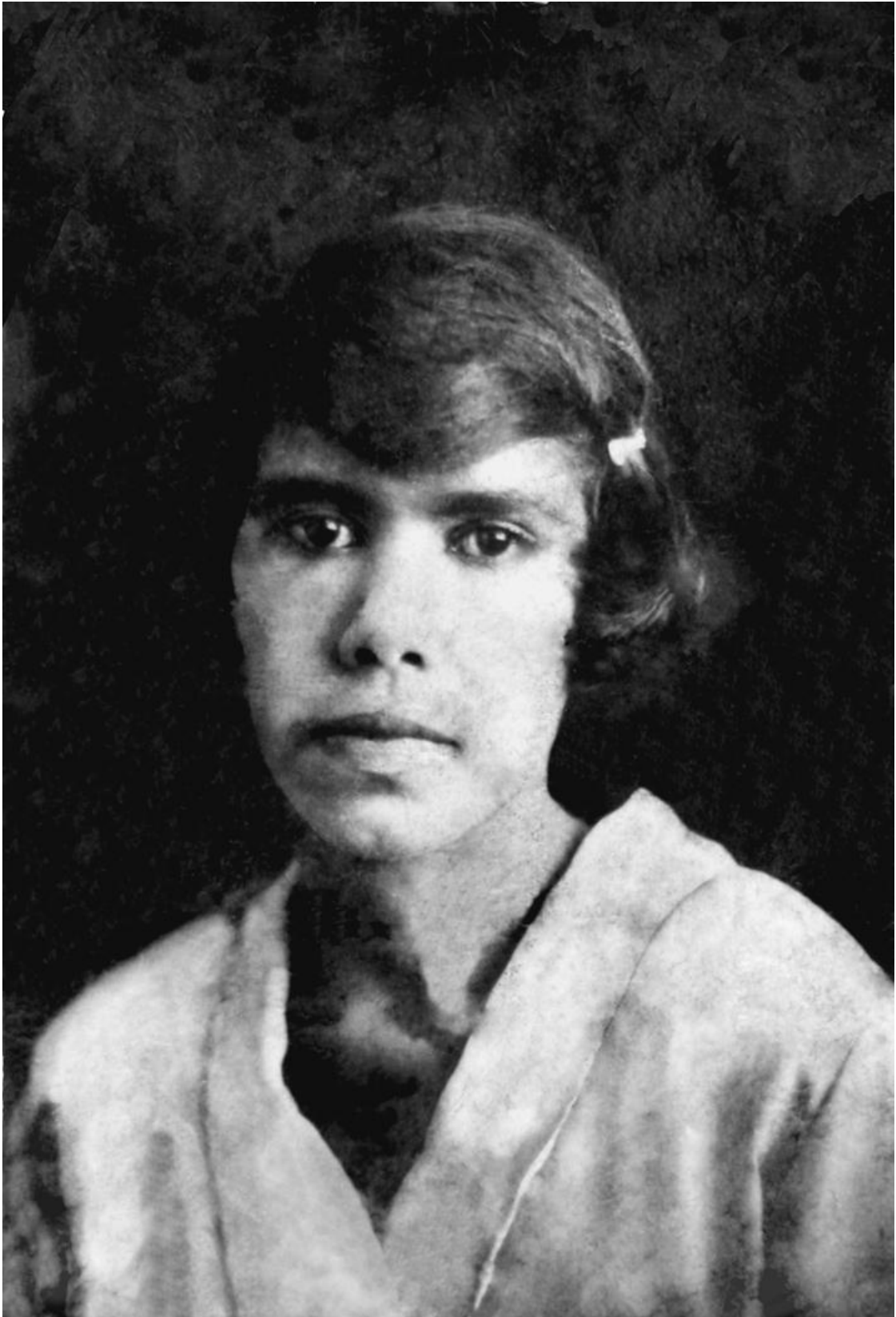


Fig. 5 Photographer unidentified, *Effie Priestley*, ca. 1924, photograph.



Fig. 6 Photographer unidentified, *Sophie Mummins in Domestic Servant Uniform*, ca. 1910, photograph.



Fig. 7 Photographer unidentified, *Three Aboriginal Women Domestic Workers, One Being a Cook for a missionary, the Rev. Leak at Point McLeay Mission Station*, early 20th century, photograph.



Fig. 8 M. Truman, *Coloured Children's Orphanage – Girls' Dormitory*, undated, photograph.



Fig. 9 Photographer unidentified, *Hospital at Woorabinda, Queensland, 1953*, photograph.



Fig. 10 Arnold Kramer, *The Striped Overcoat of a Prison Uniform Worn at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp Bearing a Purple Triangle on the Number Patch*, 1990, photograph.

5. Critical Literacy

The lived experiences of my family Elders exist in opposition to popular perspectives of Aboriginal histories in Queensland. Very little has changed in public consciousness about the injustices inflicted upon Aboriginal people since Rusden asserted 130 years ago that "...the very secrecy with which Queensland shrouded her dark deeds, showed that she could not absolve herself in her own conscience."³¹

Henry Reynolds more critically identifies that a deliberate exclusion of Aboriginal perspectives has taken place and terms this exclusion the "historical neglect" of Aboriginal people.³² Critical literacy models, that can be defined as reading texts with strategies of 'higher order comprehension',³³ encourage conscious engagement with histories in my practice and support critical questioning of the ideological, pedagogical and hegemonic functions of the textual forms of these histories.³⁴ The exclusion of Aboriginal perspectives from popular historical myth silences truth and amounts to an un-writing of history.

In models of critical literacy this un-writing of history by means of textual omission is identified as a gap and/or a silence.³⁵ While gaps and silences are primarily understood as literary tropes, they operate as visual strategies for communication that act with the same effectiveness and agency in artworks. Fiona Foley³⁶ and Felix Gonzalez-Torres³⁷ both engage with gaps and silences in their art practices. The specific works by Foley, *Land Deal*, 1995, (fig.11), and Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991 (fig. 12), provide a visual context for my studio work. These artworks illustrate for me that what is made present in the read of a work and what is omitted act upon the effectiveness and agency of subject matter. This interplay forms visual gaps and silences that speak to binaries of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence and memory and denial. The artist Julie Gough also acknowledges that both the silences and gaps are

³¹ G. W. Rusden quoted in Forde, "Confinement and Control".

³² Henry Reynolds, introduction to *Dispossession: Black Australians and White Invaders*, (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1989), xii-xiii.

³³ Allen Luke, "Critical literacy in Australia: A matter of context and standpoint," *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 43, 5 (2000): 4, accessed September 10, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/docview/216917617/abstract?accountid=14543>

³⁴ Allen Luke, "Critical Literacy: Foundational Notes," *Theory Into Practice* 5, 11 (2012): 8, accessed May 21, 2013, <http://www.tandfonline.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/doi/abs/10.1080/00405841.2012.636324>.

³⁵ Malcolm Hayward, "List of Critical Terms and Definitions," *Department of English - Indiana University of Pennsylvania*, last modified June 27, 1995, <http://www.english.iup.edu/mhayward/terms.htm>.

³⁶ See: Franca Tamisari, "Quiet Waters that Abrade the Bridges: New Forms of Visibility in Fiona Foley's Art," in *Fiona Foley: Forbidden*, ed. Michele Helmrich (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2009), 6-10.

significant phenomena in her practice. Gough³⁸ sees that silence and gaps exist as historical omissions, literary tropes, philosophical partitions and creative methodologies across research led arts practice.



Fig. 11 Fiona Foley, *Land Deal*, 1995, flour, mixed media, found objects.



Fig. 12 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991, billboard.

³⁷ See: Bell Hooks, "Subversive Beauty: New Modes of Contestation," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, 2006), 177-180.

³⁸ Julie Gough, "Messages Received and Lately Understood," *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* 2, 1 (2001): 155-162, accessed May 07, 2013, <http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=594323919055702;res=IELNZC>.

6. Art Discourse Context

In discussions about contemporary art made by Aboriginal people, the semantics of language and the context of its use have established frameworks for recognising and associating artistic practices. I situate my current art practice within the cannon of contemporary art made by artists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage.³⁹ I am aware that the context of this language frames my work and research as contributing to contemporary art discussions aside from what is recognised as ‘Aboriginal art’.⁴⁰ Bruce McLean in his essay, *This land is mine/This land is me*, has associated my work with that of practitioners interested in “revisionism” through a program of “re-examining whose point of view gets recorded, (and) whose voice matters”.⁴¹ Within this cannon of contemporary art, artists and their practices can be recognised and associated through commonalities of content, ideology and studio methodologies rather than on ethnic grounds alone.⁴²

I recognise key elements of the practices of Fiona Foley, Julie Gough and Yhonnie Scarce as exemplars for both my research and studio methodologies. This view is also supported by Tess Allass in her description of my practice as being situated “very comfortably” alongside senior artists in this discourse including Foley and Gough.⁴³ Allass commented, “Like those before him, Harding has relied on the oral histories of his own family members and published investigations of these histories”.⁴⁴

Foley, Gough, and Scarce are viewed as practising from within a post-colonial art discourse. While I acknowledge that post-colonial art discourse goes some way towards describing the content and ideology of much contemporary art by Aboriginal people, I am beginning to understand that this language and discourse is becoming limited in its use to describe artworks and artists and the nuances of experience. While there are explanations of post-colonial

³⁹ Bruce McLean, “This Land is Mine/This Land is Me,” in *My Country, I Still Call Australia Home: Contemporary Art from Black Australia*, Queensland Art Gallery (Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, 2013), 14. In this McLean was referring to artists included in the show *My Country, I still call Australia home: contemporary art from Black Australia*, which included my work *unnamed* 2012.

⁴⁰ See: Bell quoted in Archie Moore, “Black Eye = Black Viewpoint: A Conversation With ProppaNOW,” in *Richard Bell: Positivity*, ed. Robert Leonard (Fortitude Valley: Institute of Modern Art, 2006), 83. Richard Bell states that “the popular idea of Aboriginal art as everybody around here knows it is dots and bark paintings.”

⁴¹ McLean, “This Land is Mine/This Land is Me,” 14.

⁴² Carrie Miller, “Is it Time we Stopped Talking about Aboriginal Art,” *Australian Art Collector* 57, July-September (2011): 104.

⁴³ Tess Allass, “A Stitch in Time,” in *string theory: Focus on Contemporary Australian Art*, ed. Michael Fitzgerald (Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, 2013), 44.

⁴⁴ Allass, “A Stitch in Time,” 44.

discourse as pertaining to the period coming after the end of colonialism⁴⁵ and/or that of ideology “conceptually transcending or superseding the parameters of colonialism”,⁴⁶ I align with a developing discourse that views ‘post-colonialism’ as problematic for Aboriginal people. The semantics of post-colonialism positions power within an ‘Anglocentric’⁴⁷ paradigm. Aboriginal political activist and artist Richard Bell sees that the language of ‘liberation art’ is better positioned to describe his works in the cannon of contemporary art by Aboriginal people because the end of colonialism is not the reality for Aboriginal people in Australia and because the content, ideology and intent of art made within this cannon exists beyond the scope of broader post-colonial theory.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Peter Childs and R.J. Patrick Williams, introduction to *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, by Peter Childs and R.J. Patrick Williams (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1997), 1-3.

⁴⁶ Childs and Williams, introduction, 4.

⁴⁷ Childs and Williams, introduction, 1.

⁴⁸ Conversation with Richard Bell, October 3, 2013. Through my discussions with Bell I have come to believe that it is important that artists maintain the ability to self-determine the terms of the art cannon within which they practice.

7. A Poetic Sensibility

Critical reflection of my visual work preceding this research project revealed to me that investigations into poetic modes of expression had influenced innovation in my approach to the communication of content in my work. I recognised that works that engage poetic modes of expression that are less immediate in their disclosure of content, are able to invite inquiry and to generate emotional responses from viewers.

While I had previously engaged ‘the poetic’ in my practice, I was not yet conscious of the connectedness of my use of poetic modes. Critical reflection exposed consistencies in my emergent visual strategies that spurred my want to develop ‘a poetic sensibility’ as a creative methodology. I have come to use the phrase ‘a poetic sensibility’ in the framing of my research question to describe my conscious methodology of using a range of poetic modes of expression in my practice.

When applied in a humanities context, the term ‘sensibility’ can be understood to mean the capacity for responding to aesthetic stimuli, the ability to perceive or feel or the capacity for responding to sensory input such as emotion and impression. Moreover, the use of ‘sensibility’ in poetics commonly has applications for referring to a reader possessing an informed perspective on the tropes of written poetry.⁴⁹ In the context of my research question I frame my application of ‘sensibility’ equally as much in relation to my conscious use of poetic modes of expression, as I do in the sense of a viewer’s capacity for responding, perceiving and feeling.

With the aim of better understanding the successful and unsuccessful qualities of my previous works, and how I might make use of poetic modes of expression, I researched methodologies of written poetry. Poetic structure is defined by Ira Sadoff as:

...the dramatic (lived, observed) connections among the craft elements (image, metaphor, diction, syntax, line, music) and the resulting unifying force (emotion, conflict, vision).⁵⁰

Sadoff promotes the value of a heightened consciousness and of fostering mindfulness in poets, and shows this as the foundation for working with memory, history and experience in poetry.⁵¹ These ideas highlighted for me the value of inserting my presence in my depictions of the

⁴⁹ See: “Lyrical Ballads 1798 by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge,” accessed September 10, 2013, <http://www.1minyoga.com/cmadras/209/209a1.pdf>.

⁵⁰ Ira Sadoff, “Poetic Memory, Poetic Design,” *New England Review* 31, 3 (2010): 110, accessed May 22, 2013, <http://search.proquest.com.libraryproxy.griffith.edu.au/docview/763616639>.

⁵¹ Sadoff, “Poetic Memory, Poetic Design,” 109.

histories and experiences that I address in my work. I became aware of my ability to perceive and feel, and my capacity for responding to the emotional weight of the content of my work. Flanders describes a process of expression alleviating emotional weight:

*At first, emotions arise as diverse, inchoate feeling. (...) Unexpressed and unresolved, the emotion is a burden. The artist frees him or herself from this “oppressive” state by exploring and expressing the emotion in some kind of language; be it a language of words, images, or notes. Through language, the emotion takes a definitive shape in consciousness. Somehow, as a result of this process, the burden is lifted and the mind is lightened or eased.*⁵²

In addition to a heightened consciousness and mindfulness in poets, Sadoff suggests that through paying particular attention to detail, the specifics of memory aid the dramatized reproduction of experience in poetry, and therefore advance the gathering of emotional weight from line to line.⁵³ With this in mind I began to understand how a poetic sensibility could dramatize the depiction of life under government control and give form to the emotional burden I feel in knowing these histories. The outcome of this understanding was that the painful details of my Nanna’s experience of being forced to wear a coarse hessian sack as punishment, aid the dramatized reproduction of her experience in my artworks.

⁵² Joseph L. Flanders, “Creativity and Emotion: Reformulating the Romantic Theory of Art” (paper presented at Cognitio 2004 Graduate students conference on cognitive science, Université du Québec, Montreal, April 29-30, 2004).

⁵³ Sadoff, “*Poetic Memory, Poetic Design*,” 109.

8. A Dead Crab Can Never Look As Lively As A Live Crab

Poetic sensibilities have the potential to be awakened to meaning when materiality has semiotic purpose. I aim to communicate meaning through materiality and I acknowledge the strategies of Yhonnie Scarce in *The Day We Went Away*, 2004 (fig. 13), Julie Gough in *Some Tasmanian Aboriginal Children Living with Non-Aboriginal People Before 1840*, 2008 (fig. 14) and Felix Gonzalez-Torres in *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991 (fig. 15) as crucial to this understanding. Each of these artists selects and manipulates materials to communicate poetic meaning in their work. Allas describes how Scarce has worked with clear blown glass as a potent material signifier to create poetic suggestions of transparency, visibility, and the revealing of truth with regards to the difficult histories of an oppressed people.⁵⁴



Fig. 13 Yhonnie Scarce, *The Day We Went Away*, 2004, 40 pieces of blown glass, found suitcase.

⁵⁴ Tess Allas, "What They Wanted: Yhonnie Scarce," *Kluge-Ruhe Aboriginal Art Collection – University of Virginia*, last modified January 28, 2013, http://www.kluge-ruhe.org/special_projects/yhonnie-scarce-artist-residency.



Fig. 14 Julie Gough, *Some Tasmanian Aboriginal children living with non-Aboriginal people before 1840*, 2008, wooden chair and tea tree sticks.



Fig. 15 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991, clocks, paint on wall.

Scarce's strategy for creating poetic meaning through the use of materiality as signifier demonstrates how the denotative and connotative reads of specific materials can be employed to create metaphor and metonym. This poetic strategy resists literal depiction and didactic signification and is able to communicate social and political content with subtlety and potency. A further example of this is Scarce's work *Burial Ground*, 2011 (fig. 16). Here Scarce communicates social and political content without prescribing concrete conclusions. This is achieved through what Sergiler describes as the "economies of meaning and signification" that are active in artworks which resist literal interpretation.⁵⁵



Fig. 16 Yhonnie Scarce, *Burial Ground*, 2011, blown glass and Perspex.

As an outcome of my investigations into strategies for using materiality as poetic signifiers, I have become aware of the importance of considering the authenticity of materials and objects that I take over into my artworks that address history, memory and experience. On the subject of material signification, Jacques Ranciere explains that where everyday items become material

⁵⁵ Karma Sergiler, "Untitled (History)," in *Untitled (12th Istanbul Biennial)*, ed. Jens Hoffmann et al. (Sishane: Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, 2011), 66.

objects, they stand as “poetic bodies that wear the traces of their history”.⁵⁶ This brings me to consider that the authenticity that a specific material holds, with regards to the subject matter of an artwork, has an inseparable relationship to its agency and effectiveness as a poetic mode of expression. The relationship between the authenticity of visual signifiers in artworks and how they communicate meaning is poetically described by John Heartfield when he states:

*A dead crab can never look as lively as a live crab.*⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Jaques Ranciere, “The Politics of Aesthetics,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), 125.

⁵⁷ Heartfield quoted in: Andres Mario Zervignon, introduction to *John Heartfield and the Agitated Image: Photography, Persuasion, and the Rise of Avant-Garde Photomontage*, by Andres Mario Zervignon (London, The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 3.

9. Studio Methodologies

My studio research has involved the rigorous analysis of materials for their semiotic readings and also exploration of new techniques in working with unfamiliar materials. During this Honours project I have worked to create meaning through materiality by completing a series of artworks that were made by altering found objects. The re-used hessian sacks in *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls*, 2013 (fig. 17) gave form to my imagined versions of the hessian sacks that my Nanna Lawton and other young Aboriginal girls were forced to wear as punishment on Woorabinda Mission. It was difficult to source hessian sacks that feature the type of weave and natural irregularities of fibres that I am told were commonplace in hessian sacks used for foodstuffs around the 1930s. As with those sacks used in the practice of torture at Woorabinda, I have cut neck-holes into five, coarse hessian sacks, but in this instance I have softened the neckline with mohair embroidery to prevent abrasion-rash on soft skin.⁵⁸ It is important to note that only the found hessian sacks and fine mohair thread were used in this work; the authenticity of the two materials chosen being essential to their purpose as poetic signifiers.



Fig. 17 Dale Harding, *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls*, 2013, found hessian sacks, mohair thread.

⁵⁸ As a young girl my Nanna Lawton was hospitalized because of the severity of the abrasion rash around her neck and under her arms that was caused by being made to wear a hessian sack.

As a strategy for depicting the potent reality of my Nanna Lawton's experiences, I have consciously used a range of poetic modes of expression in *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* (fig. 17). This strategy is intended to dramatize the retelling of my Nanna's experiences and to invite personal responses from viewers. These poetic modes include: old hessian sacks (on a reduced scale) and fine mohair thread as 'authentic' material signifiers. The omission of armholes in the sacks alludes to confinement and restriction. Similarly, bodily presence and absence is suggested in the sculpted neckline and flat-pressed body of the sacks. A soft pink crown has been embroidered on the sacks as a metonymic brand that speaks for state, government and empire,⁵⁹ and a decorative collar has been applied to reference uniforms worn by Aboriginal domestics. The poetic title is also an entry point into an understanding of the work's content.⁶⁰

Another related work, *White Collared*, 2013 (fig. 18) consists of five handmade head-collars⁶¹ that take the form of imagined artefacts of colonised labour. Inverted, the fallen-collars⁶² display an absence while suggesting a bodily presence with references to traditional headdress. In addition to the way these collars denote a time period and a particular dress code, they were specifically chosen for their pre-existing patina, their distressed fibres that indicate wear from use, and the likelihood that they were handmade. Each of these characteristics is crucial to my artistic intent to position these collars as possible historical artefacts. To contrast against the niceties of the fine lacework of these fallen-collars, I have used stiff rawhide and brass hardware to apply rigidity, control and restriction upon the imagined wearer.

In the work *White Collared* (fig. 18), I have treated the rawhide strapping and the brass hardware to reposition these new materials in the historical context of the found collars. The brass D-rings that I have used are authentic saddlery hardware, and when turned on their side, they give a reading of stirrups of a (controlling) rider in the saddle. These D-rings came to my studio as polished 'bright' brass, but through a process of chemically removing the clear protective coating that prevented oxidation and then applying acids to the bare brass, I have created a tarnished appearance that instantly denotes age and heavy use. Rawhide has a specific semiotic purpose in that it was a common material accessible to frontier pastoralists and

⁵⁹ The metonymic brand applied to the sacks makes reference to other impositions of insignia. See: (fig. 10).

⁶⁰ Carly Lane, "First, Sight; Then, Acknowledge: Building Indigenous Visibility Through the Undisclosed," in *undisclosed: 2nd National Indigenous Art Triennial*, ed. Eric Meredith et al. (Canberra: National Gallery of Australia, 2012), 11-12. In this Carly Lane discusses how political artworks by Indigenous Australians offer an entry point to engagement with difficult issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

⁶¹ I am using the term head-collars to refer to restraints used in animal husbandry to apply restriction and control.

⁶² A fallen collar refers to a detachable collar worn by women in colonial times.

colonisers. This work is less of a retrospective gesture to ease the pain of my Elders, as in *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* (fig. 17), than it is to counter the gaps and silences that amount to the ‘historical neglect’⁶³ of the social and political realities experienced by Aboriginal people who were forced to live under government control.



Fig. 18 Dale Harding, *White Collared*, 2013, found collars, rawhide, thread, brass.

For my final examination I will not exhibit my works *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* (fig. 17) and *White Collared* (fig. 18) as they are currently included in the exhibition titled *string theory: Focus on contemporary Australian art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia in Sydney. Instead I will be exhibiting photographic documentation of both works in the place of the original pieces.

I consider that these two works are pivotal and that they have extended my ability to depict with poetry and potency the realities experienced by my family Elders. I plan to extend the success of these works with subsequent bodies of works that more fully explore the potential for the media used to potentially reveal content of history, memory and experience. I reflect that in my practice I

⁶³ Reynolds, introduction, xiii.

have predominantly made wall-based works that have not previously investigated ways of utilising and activating open space as a considered element. This observation was also made during my mid-year review where Donal Fitzpatrick drew my attention to how a conscious use of the exhibition space could activate and enhance the strategies of poetic modes of expression that I use in my work. In a new direction for my practice, I am currently developing concepts that employ spatial considerations as an extension of my use of poetic sensibilities.

10. Contribution To Art Discourses And Aboriginal Communities

*I don't like this idea of having to undermine your ancestors, of ridiculing them, them, and making less of them. I think we are here because we're part of a historical process and I think that this attitude that you have to murder your father in order to start something new is bullshit.*⁶⁴

In discussions on the canon and works of contemporary art by artists of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage⁶⁵ descriptors that are used like 'subtle', 'quiet' and 'gentle', when applied to intentional strategies, are often equated with passivity and impotence, with implications that act to dismiss the contributions of both artworks and artists. These implications uphold notions that direct, literal and didactic modes of expression are the few effective means of contributing to the current art discourse from an Aboriginal perspective. While these strategies have featured with potency in the communication of difficult and political content in works by artists who have shaped current discussions in this field, I hold that the unquestioned assuming of these modes of expression would be disingenuous in my practice.

I argue for the necessity of diverse modes of expression. Overt tactics have been, and continue to be, effective in instigating dialogue around significant social, political and cultural issues. Thankfully, with dialogues underway and the potential for new discussions to occur, younger artists, such as myself, and my peers are able to contribute our creative voices in the visual languages that reflect our contemporary experiences. While I have previously utilised overt tactics such as literal depiction and didactic statements to prescribe concrete conclusions in my work, my developing use of a poetic sensibility works to achieve a balance between non-literal expression and the retention of social and political potency.

With my intent being to add my voice to contemporary discussions of visual art that were established by artists including Fiona Foley, Laurie Nilsen, Julie Gough and Richard Bell, I choose the approach of making constructive contributions to these discussions over the effacement of current practices. I am building upon the artistic and socio-political foundations provided by works of these artists and through their ongoing dialogues. As such, I claim with respect that my work functions as "an extension"⁶⁶ of existing practices. My approach is also influenced by ongoing considerations of family and community.

⁶⁴ Felix Gonzalez-Torres quoted in Robert Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Etre un Espion," in *Felix Gonzalez-Torres*, ed. Julie Ault (New York: The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, 2006), 229.

⁶⁵ McLean, "This Land is Mine/This Land is Me," 14.

⁶⁶ Storr, "Felix Gonzalez-Torres: Etre un Espion," 229.

I hold to the ideal that because my work can be understood within the specific social and political context of Aboriginal experiences, my work should, by design, act to contribute back to my family and our communities. Some of my contributions are evidenced by the physical works of *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls* (fig. 17) and *White Collared* (fig. 18) that have also been comprehensively documented in images and in an essay printed in the *string theory* exhibition catalogue. My accounts of these works and histories are also recorded and archived in the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia's digital media collection as educational resources for public access.

11. Conclusion

In this project I set out to visually notate and write into history the lived experiences of my family members who were forced to live under government control on Woorabinda Aboriginal Mission in Central Queensland. I have found that using a poetic sensibility is an effective mode to address difficult social and historical gaps and silences. This has led to my strategy of stepping away from literal and didactic descriptions of the outcomes of confinement and control, and to my moving towards engaging materiality as a potent device for eliciting inquiry and response to my subject matter.

I have used mixed-method research methodologies where I have moved between being a participant, an observer and a recorder. These methodologies encompass recognition, respect and consideration of Aboriginal cultural practices of oral history retelling. The artworks in the project activate my inherited histories. The project revises limiting historical assumptions and shares significant truths of Aboriginal life under forced government control.

I have come to a fuller appreciation of how my poetic visual process is providing a platform for investigating ways forward in a society that is burdened with histories of oppression. The work is ongoing and I will continue to use the conscious poetic process of revealing, exposing, describing, revising and notating family experiences to hopefully lessen the burden of these truths on my family and our communities.

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Fig. 1 *Queensland government crest*, 1945. Scanned off a document from the Director of Native Affairs.

Fig. 2 Unidentified, *View of the Taroom Aboriginal Settlement, Queensland*, 1914. Photograph. National Library of Australia. Reproduced from *Digital Collections: Pictures*, National Library of Australia, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://www.nla.gov.au/apps/cdview/?pi=nla.pic-vn6190377-v>.

Fig. 3 Unidentified, *Beginnings of the Woorabinda Aboriginal Settlement*, ca. 1927. Photograph. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. Reproduced from *Picture Queensland*, State Library of Queensland, accessed May 10, 2013, http://bishop.slq.qld.gov.au/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1382405991643~508&locale=en_AU&metadata_object_ratio=7&show_metadata=true&VIEWER_URL=/view/action/singleViewer.do?&DELIVERY_RULE_ID=10&frameId=1&usePid1=true&usePid2=true.

Fig. 4 Unidentified, *Ghungalu Elders: Kemp, Priestley and Brown siblings with Uncle Tim Kemp*, ca. 1990. Photograph. Lawton family collection.

Fig. 5 Unidentified, *Effie Priestley*, ca. 1924. Photograph. Lawton family collection.

Fig. 6 Unidentified, *Sophie Mummins in domestic servant uniform*, ca. 1910. Photograph. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. Reproduced from *Picture Queensland*, State Library of Queensland, accessed August 26, 2013, http://bishop.slq.qld.gov.au/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1382410703109~702&locale=en_AU&metadata_object_ratio=7&show_metadata=true&VIEWER_URL=/view/action/singleViewer.do?&DELIVERY_RULE_ID=10&frameId=1&usePid1=true&usePid2=true.

Fig. 7 Unidentified, *Three Aboriginal women domestic workers, one being a cook for a missionary, the Rev. Leak at Point McLeay Mission Station*, early 20th century. Photograph. State Library of South Australia. Reproduced from *Point McLeay Collection*, State Library of South Australia, accessed August 26, 2013, <http://www.catalog.slsa.sa.gov.au/record=b2036012~S1>.

Fig. 8 M. Truman, *Coloured Children's Orphanage – Girls' Dormitory*, undated. Photograph. Swarthmore College. Reproduced from *Friends Historical Library*, Swarthmore College, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://triptych.brynmaur.edu/cdm/ref/collection/Friends/id/660>.

Fig. 9 Unidentified, *Hospital at Woorabinda, Queensland*, 1953. Photograph. John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland. Reproduced from *Picture Queensland*, State Library of Queensland, accessed May 10, 2013, http://bishop.slq.qld.gov.au/view/action/singleViewer.do?dvs=1382416521923~720&locale=en_AU&metadata_object_ratio=7&show_metadata=true&VIEWER_URL=/view/action/singleViewer.do?&DELIVERY_RULE_ID=10&frameId=1&usePid1=true&usePid2=true.

Fig. 10 Arnold Kramer, *The Striped Overcoat of a Prison Uniform Worn at the Buchenwald Concentration Camp Bearing a Purple Triangle on the Number Patch*, 1990. Photograph. United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Reproduced from *Photograph Collection*, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, accessed April 26, 2013, <http://collections.ushmm.org/search/catalog/pa1091613>.

Fig. 11 Fiona Foley, *Land Deal*, 1995. Flour, mixed media, found objects. Dimensions variable. National Gallery of Australia. Reproduced from *Collection Search*, National Gallery of Australia, accessed April 20, 2013, <http://cs.nga.gov.au/IMAGES/MED/7069.jpg>.

Fig. 12 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, *Untitled*, 1991. Billboard. Dimensions variable. The Dream Being. "Felix Gonzalez-Torres." Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://thedreambeing.com/tag/felix-gonzalez-torres/>.

Fig. 13 Yhonnie Scarce, *The Day We Went Away*, 2004. 40 pieces of blown glass, found suitcase. Dimensions variable. Dianne Tanzer Gallery and Projects. "Yhonnie Scarce – Australian Experimental Art Foundation." Accessed April 20, 2013. <http://diannetanzergallery.net.au/?m=201303>.

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Fig. 16 Yhonnie Scarce, *Burial Ground*, 2011. Blown glass and Perspex. 33 x 133 x 38cm. Dear Creative. "Artist Feature: Yhonnie Scarce, In-Between Heaven & Hell." Accessed October 15, 2013. <http://www.janellelow.com/?p=377>.

Fig. 17 Dale Harding, *Bright Eyed Little Dormitory Girls*, 2013. Found hessian sacks, mohair thread. 200 x 34 x 5cm. Image courtesy the artist.

Fig. 18 Dale Harding, *White Collared*, 2013. Found collars, rawhide, thread, brass. 200 x 38 x 2cm. Image courtesy the artist.